



NEWS RELEASE

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WESTERN DISTRICT OF MISSOURI

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

TRI-CITY MINISTRIES' BOOKKEEPER PLEADS GUILTY TO DEFRAUDING BAPTIST ORGANIZATION OF \$617,950

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – Todd P. Graves, United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, announced that a former employee of Tri-City Ministries pleaded guilty to a federal information today admitting that he defrauded the Baptist organization of at least \$617,950.02 by taking money from its checking account and the checking account of its church camp.

William Dwight Free, 60, a former bookkeeper/business manager of Tri-City Ministries located in Independence, Mo., waived his right to a grand jury and pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Howard F. Sachs this afternoon to a federal information that charges him with wire fraud.

By pleading guilty, **Free** admitted he devised a scheme to commit wire fraud against Tri-City Ministries between March 21, 1997, and April 1, 2001. **Free** was employed with the Baptist organization from approximately June 1996 until Aug. 2002. During the same time period, **Free** also co-owned and operated Ridgecrest Development Corp., a real estate business that Tri-City Ministries helped to promote and market, and owned and operated a separate residential development company named Unique Homes, Inc.

In carrying out his wire fraud scheme, **Free** made numerous telephone calls from Independence, Mo., to Ringgold, La., to determine the amount of funds available that he could embezzle from Tri-City Ministries' account at the Bank of Ringgold.

Free used that information to obtain money from Tri-City Ministries' bank accounts by negotiating unauthorized Tri-City Ministries' checks for his own personal or business use and concealed his conduct through deceptive accounting practices. **Free** would post unauthorized cash disbursements to the organization's fixed accounts to cover up the unauthorized activity, Graves said. Specifically, **Free** negotiated unauthorized checks on Tri-City Ministries' Louisiana-based church camp checking account in the amount of \$7,000 to Unique Homes,

\$358,100 to Ridgecrest Development, and \$44,900 to his spouse and children.

It was further part of **Free's** scheme to write unauthorized checks on Tri-City Ministries' American Association of Christian Schools checking accounts at Commerce Bank and Blue Ridge Bank and Trust, both located in Kansas City, Mo., Graves said. **Free** negotiated \$207,950 in unauthorized checks from these accounts. **Free** used \$15,540.02 of that money to make payments toward his personal Visa card, \$182,500 was given to Ridgecrest Development and \$10,000 was provided to his spouse and children.

Under federal law, Graves explained, **Free** may be subject to a maximum sentence of up to five years in federal prison, plus a fine up to \$250,000. His sentencing hearing will be scheduled after the completion of a presentence investigation by the United States Probation Office.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney K. Michael Warner. It was investigated by United States Secret Service and the Independence, Mo., Police Department.

This news release, as well as additional information about the office of the United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, is available on-line at
www.usdoj.gov/usao/mow